

Five Variables of a Catalan Referendum on Independence

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On 9 June 2017 the President of the Catalan Government, Carles Puigdemont, announced a referendum on Catalan independence. As seen in the past, however, it is likely that any further juridical manifestation will be challenged by the Spanish Government before the Constitutional Court, and that the Court will declare void any action that poses a threat for the sovereignty of the Spanish People.

The last decade saw a growing thrive for Catalan independence. The enactment of an Autonomy Statute in 2006 through referendum was actually intended to close the debate for a longer period. However, the Spanish Constitutional Court repealed a part of the Statute in 2010 and, from that point, some parties and social actors began to believe that there was no place for the People of Catalonia under the Spanish Constitution.

In November 2014, the former Catalan President Mas promoted a *soft referendum*, an unofficial referendum to circumvent the constitutional requirements for referenda under Spanish Law. This was more or less tolerated by the Spanish Government; although later, when Mas was no longer President, a penal court, withdrew *Mas'* right to hold a public office. The *soft referendum* failed, mostly because only one third of the Catalan people voted for it. In the following, parliamentary elections were being held in Catalonia. The parties promoting Catalan independence tried to overcome the merely representative nature of the elections, adding the flavor of a plebiscite, but failed shortly from obtaining an absolute majority of votes.

This outcome is not the end of the story. Here we are again three years later: the Catalan Government calls a unilateral referendum and the Spanish Government denies its competence to do so, ready to challenge any act before the Constitutional Court. Are we at the same point as in the scenario of 2014? What will be the outcome? In the following, I will explore five variables in order to analyze those questions.

1. The use of force

It is very hard to believe that the Catalan Government has the political strength to persuade its civil servants to act against the law in order to achieve a constitutional referendum. But even if the referendum takes a soft nature like the one in 2014, this time, the Spanish Government will probably not tolerate it. On the other hand, one might ask how the Spanish Government intends to stop it. It would need legitimate force e.g. through control over the Catalan police to prevent the opening of electoral colleges. In this vein, the Catalan Government is promoting Catalonia publicly as an oppressed People: Puigdemont asked the Spanish Prime Minister Rajoy to explain what kind of force he will use; and Pep Guardiola is branding Spain as an "authoritarian State" (yes, dear football fans, the famous player and trainer, is seemingly becoming a "Founding Father" of Catalan independence). In this regard, the use of force is a red line: too much of it will rather fuel the struggle for independence.

2. Unilateral independence as a Plan B

In 2014, the unsuccessful referendum opened the path to ordinary elections. This time, the Catalan Government rejected this outcome and instead, the administrative construction of an independent state after a unilateral breakup is being discussed. This is supposed to be the Plan B and, without any doubt, takes the conflict to another stage, putting all the pressure on the citizens who will have to choose between two sides, Catalonia or Spain. But in a society divided on this issue, the dissident will have to become the political enemy. Is really the Catalan Government ready to cross this line?

3. Financial sovereignty

The rhetoric on Catalan independence has always circulated around the classic terms of political sovereignty.

However, financial sovereignty has been a fundamental conflict as well, and even a key argument against independence. Catalonia is an essential motor of Spanish economy, and therefore claims with no success a special fiscal treatment. The irony is that since the economic crisis, the Catalan administration had to be sustained from Spanish public budget. The private financial markets are closed for the Catalan Government and this means that in the case of a new state, there is a high risk to crash just a minute after the unilateral declaration of independence. In this sense, the Catalan Government has stressed that independence does not entail an exit from the European Union, knowing that the Union would be an excellent financial buffer for an independent Catalonia.

4. Russian Support?

In the last months, some rumors have suggested that Russia is willing to support an independent Catalonia with financial means. This could be wishful thinking. But in the last years, in fact, Russia has constantly intervened in national politics in order to reinforce its own international power. Therefore it is not crazy to imagine Russia backing an independent Catalonia in order to ultimately weaken the European Union. This hypothesis would give the conflict even an international dimension apart from Spanish and Catalan interests.

5. A glooming political scenario in Catalonia

Many criticize President Rajoy for his passiveness with regards to Catalan interests. But he is right underlining that he cannot find a steady partner for political cooperation in Catalonia. First, the political parties cheering for independence are broadly divided among each other. Second, the Catalan Government is temporary: President Puigdemont is not running for re-election and it is hard to believe that the strange marriage between PdeCat (Christian democrats in an old style) and the CUP (libertarians) will last any longer. Third, and more important, the political landscape in Catalonia could be very different after the elections in 2019. The results in national and municipal elections shows that PdeCat (the party of the President Puigdemont) loses its electoral basis rapidly; ERC, a party in the government coalition, is in the pole position. But while PdeCat has made of independence a tactic movement, not a principle, ERC defines itself by the goal of independent Catalonia. If ERC leads the future government, it is hard to imagine a step back. But ERC will need coalition partners. The *Comunes* have burst into the scenario (governing the city of Barcelona), promoting political consensus between the political forces in the Catalanian and Spanish Parliaments. Besides that, the Socialist Party has a new leader, ready to look for new solutions. From a political point of view it is thus hard to say whether Catalan independence will have sufficient support.

The five variables are essential when discussing Catalan independence. However, they are so broad that it is hard to predict the future. It thus seems as if Catalonia is at this point covered in the fog of uncertainty.

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